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# **Poster Presentations: Authentic Assessment of Work Integrated Learning**

**Judith McNamara\***

School of Law, Queensland University of Technology, [j2.mcnamara@qut.edu.au](mailto:j2.mcnamara@qut.edu.au)

**Ingrid Larkin**

School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Queensland University of Technology,  
[ik.larkin@qut.edu.au](mailto:ik.larkin@qut.edu.au)

**Amanda Beatson**

School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Queensland University of Technology,  
[a.beatson@qut.edu.au](mailto:a.beatson@qut.edu.au)

**Abstract** – The paper examines how poster presentations can be used to authentically assess student learning during internships. While poster presentations are commonly used for assessment in the sciences, they are an innovative approach to assessment in the humanities. It is argued that posters are one way that universities can overcome the substantial challenges of assessing work integrated learning. The paper evaluates the use of poster presentations for assessment in two internship units at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The first is a unit in the Faculty of Business where students majoring in advertising, marketing and public relations are placed in a variety of organisations. The second unit is a law unit where students complete placements in government legal offices. The two units adopt different approaches to the poster assessment; the unit in the Faculty of Business is non-graded and the poster assessment task requires students to reflect on their learning during the internship. The law unit is graded and requires students to present on a research topic that relates to their internship. In both units the posters were presented during a poster showcase which was attended by students, workplace supervisors and members of faculty. The paper evaluates the benefits of poster presentations for students, workplace supervisors and faculty and concludes that posters can effectively and authentically assess various learning outcomes in internships in different disciplines.

**Keywords** - assessment, posters; work integrated learning; internship; authentic assessment.

## **Introduction**

This paper proposes that student poster presentations are one means of overcoming the substantial challenges that universities face in assessing work integrated learning (WIL), specifically, internship programs. WIL has been defined as: “An umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum.” Internship programs are a type of WIL in which students undertake “a structured, relevant industry placement as an integral part of their programme” (Lincoln University, 2005). There is a need to develop innovative assessment methods for internship programs that encourage reflection and integration of theory and practice within the constraints that result from the level of engagement of workplace supervisors and the ability of academic supervisors to become involved in the workplace (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto, 2008, p. 42). The benefits of posters in assessing internship programs are that they are student centred, encourage students to reflect on their learning during their internship, enable students to demonstrate their learning and to learn from other students’ experiences. They are also felt to be less intimidating than oral presentations enabling the flow of discussion around student experiences (Akister, Bannon & Mullender-Lock, 2000) and an ability to share these experiences with wide audiences including their peers, as well as internship industry supervisors, academic staff and other guests. Posters are particularly pertinent as an illustration of authentic assessment for courses which link theoretical constructs to practice in the real world (Akister et al., 2000) hence indicating their suitability as assessment in internship units.

The outline of the paper is as follows. First, the literature on authentic assessment is explored. Following this, literature addressing the benefits of poster presentations is outlined. This section also focuses on the suitability of poster presentations for internship courses. The use of posters for authentic assessment will then be evaluated in the context of two internship units at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The first is a unit in the Faculty of Business where students majoring in advertising, marketing and public relations are placed in a variety of organisations. The second unit is in the Faculty of Law where students complete placements in government legal offices. The paper concludes that posters can effectively and authentically assess learning outcomes in internships across a variety of disciplines.

### *Authentic Assessment*

There are a number of learning theories that have influenced contemporary approaches to WIL, including experiential learning theory (Milne, 2007), and the constructivist approach to learning (Wertsch, 1991). Milne's (2007) argument for experiential learning theory as a pedagogical foundation for WIL rests on the transformative process by which knowledge is created. Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as, "*a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*". Here, knowledge is created each time a learner acts – they interpret their experiences and the consequences of their actions on each occasion, and use this feedback to transform their experiences into knowledge. The constructivist approach asserts that learning is 'situated' within a particular context – that is, the value and meaning of experiences is constructed relative to the context in which the experience occurs (Wertsch, 1991). Most approaches to teaching and learning are founded on an eclectic mix of various learning theories. Whilst the learning theory that underpins WIL is important to acknowledge, it is the pedagogy that is most critical (Brodie & Irving, 2007).

One of the most prevalent issues in WIL concerns the notion of assessment. WIL practitioners have been seeking to identify valid and reliable assessment techniques that adequately evaluate learning outcomes, (see Brodie and Irving, 2007). One key term that is commonly used is 'authentic assessment'.

### *What is 'authentic assessment'?*

Reporting on difficulties with clearly defining the concept of 'authentic assessment' Knight and Yorke (2003) write: 'Authentic' assessment has been a preoccupation in the UK schools sector for a considerable time, as the desire to identify 'what pupils know and can do' pointed towards assessments that were more practical, realistic and challenging than 'traditional paper-and-pencil tests' (Torrance, 1995, p. 1). In other words, there has been a move towards assessment tasks with greater ecological validity. These definitional difficulties are mirrored in terminology. Although the term 'authentic assessment' is a commonly agreed one and is widely used in the literature on assessment, in some cases such terms as 'performance assessment', 'performance-based assessment', 'alternative assessment' or 'direct assessment' may be encountered. These terms are often used interchangeably.

Many researchers have coined their own definitions of authentic assessment, including Wiggins (1993), Stiggins (1987) and Mueller (2005). For instance, Mueller (2005) defined authentic assessment as: "*...a form of assessment in which students are asked to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills*". It is from this definition that we conceptualise authentic assessment in this paper. From this perspective, the biggest challenge for educators is the design and development of such tasks as would allow students to fully demonstrate their competence within their professional domain.

Traditional and authentic assessments operate at differing ends of a continuum. The relationship between the two types of assessment is perhaps best described in terms of a harmonic transition and certainly not a sharp division (rupture). It is important to stress that authentic assessment does not replace, but rather complements traditional assessment. Mueller (2008) developed a paradigm representing the transitional change of assessment's attributes, from traditional to authentic assessment:

**Table One – Defining attributes of authentic assessment (based on Mueller, 2008)**

<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Authentic</b>
Selecting a response	Performing a task
Contrived	Real-life
Recall and/or recognition	Construction and/or application
Teacher-structured	Student-structured
Indirect evidence	Direct evidence

Elaborating on these two approaches to assessment, Mueller (2008) explained: Authentic assessments ask students to demonstrate understanding of a concept by performing a more complex task usually representative of more meaningful application. The task is a manner of demonstrating proficiency in a given area by actually doing something. Authentic assessments often ask students to analyse, synthesize and apply what they have learned in a substantial manner, and students create new meaning in the process as

well. Authentic assessments also allow more student choice and construction in determining what is presented as evidence of proficiency. As summarised by Mueller (2008), the final difference between traditional and authentic assessments, is that authentic assessments offer more direct evidence of application and construction of knowledge. It is upon these attributes of authentic assessment that we base our argument below relating to the suitability of posters as a form of authentic assessment.

Underlying the importance of authenticity in assessment theory and practice are the principles of sound assessment. According to Brown and Knight (1994), sound assessment in the higher education context should:

- be valid, which means that assessment tasks should be strategically aligned with the goals of the university, its programmes, and its courses;
- target multiple achievements;
- use multiple methods to evaluate the same learning outcomes;
- assess the same outcomes on several occasions;
- produce useful and informative data;
- provide information that will be properly stored and well used within the university;
- be systemic – no assessment should be an island;
- be fit for purpose.

### *Posters as Authentic Assessment*

The use of posters as an assessment item for university students is not common, particularly in the law and business disciplines. However, poster presentations are familiar to many academics given their established role as an alternative to formal presentations at professional conferences (Duchin & Sherwood, 1990). They are also an established form of assessment in the sciences and in nursing education (Moneyham, 1996; Bracher, Centrall & Wilkie, 1998; Conyers, 2003) and have been used in some instances for assessment in various disciplines such as pharmacy (Scott, 2008).

We suggest that the creation of a poster as an item of assessment in WIL satisfies the attributes of authentic assessment which we have explored in the previous section. Poster presentations, like WIL, also share the underlying principles of experiential learning. This learning theory is seen when evaluating the effectiveness of posters as an assessment method. More specifically however, the use of posters as an example of authentic assessment can be summarised using Mueller's (2008) five authentic assessment attributes as demonstrated above.

First, constructing a poster involves students performing a task which is "a hands-on, problem-focused activity which encourages relation of knowledge to a specific question of interest and stimulates demonstration of comprehension" (Bracher et al., 1998, p552). The construction of posters has the potential to engage students in independent learning by requiring them to express complex information concisely, providing a catalyst for scholarly discussion and allowing them to develop both research and creative abilities (Vujakovic, 1995). In the context of WIL, it enables students to engage deeply in a research topic relevant to their placement or to reflect on their own learning during their placement. This independent analysis of students' time in industry demonstrates a level of critical thinking and deep learning which contributes to the authenticity of the assessment and the encouragement of valuable learning skills.

Second, posters as assessment of WIL can be said to be real-life rather than contrived in the sense that they require students to complete a real project. While students may not be required to create posters in their post university lives, the experiential learning skills involved in presenting complex information concisely in relation to a self-selected topic is one that may be required in practice.

Third, posters are authentic in requiring students to analyse, synthesize and apply what they have learned and to create new meanings from their learning. By engaging in self-directed learning, students develop skills in planning and monitoring their own work (Fuller, 2000). According to Vujakovic (1995), the necessity to present complex arguments concisely in the poster format and without the restrictions of linear thinking requires the students to engage in deep learning by analysing and synthesising arguments.

Fourth, a poster is student-structured; the student is responsible for their individual choice of topic, and engages in self-directed learning in planning the poster (Fuller, 2000). They chose the content and construct a presentation that most effectively conveys their central theme.

Fifth, a poster assessment provides direct evidence of student learning because the student is required to apply and construct their knowledge. This is particularly so where students are involved in presenting their poster in a poster show case. Students participating in a show case must engage in interactive conversation with audience members (Denzine, 1999). This aspect of the assessment can be quite challenging for students who may not have previously presented work in this way (Bracher et al., 1998). Students may be required to engage in various levels of conversation; some audience members may know little about the topic and others may have an extensive knowledge and wish to discuss the topic in depth. Participation in these multiple conversations also fosters in students a sense of achievement by enabling them to demonstrate their understanding of the issue and their experience to peers and members of the profession. A showcase situation also enables students to acquire networking skills (Fuller, 2000) which are valuable lifelong learning skills required by professionals in law and business.

## Case Studies

### Internship Programs at Queensland University of Technology

Internship programs are a type of WIL offered in various disciplines at QUT. Typically there are four elements that characterise an internship program; i) a specified number of work hours, ii) the work may be paid or unpaid, iii) academic credit is awarded, and iv) oversight is provided by a university representative and a corporate counterpart (DiLorenzo-Aiss & Mathisen, 1996, p. 71-73). An internship program is usually taken concurrently with other academic courses (Thiel & Hartley, 1997).

The key benefit of an internship program is that it provides students with the opportunity to put their classroom gained knowledge into practice in the workforce. This opportunity can provide students with mentoring and training which further strengthens their transferable skills and abilities, solidifies their sense of work ethic and enhances confidence in their job performance (Kane, Healy and Henson, 1992). Skills often include enhanced time management, corporate-specific communication skills, collaborative workplace skills, critical thinking, self-discipline, and an ability to initiate business related activities (Wesley & Bickle, 2005). Moreover, it often increases the job prospects of students upon graduation (Tovey, 2001). Assessment of internship programs is a significant issue for academic supervisors (O'Toole, 2007). When such an authentic program of study is designed this real world experience needs to be reflected in the manner of assessment.

[Intuition 1] is positioned as a 'real-world' university. This positioning is evidenced through its goals of achieving practical, work integrated and professional experience for its students ([Intuition 1] Blueprint, 2008). The university is working towards a more systematic approach to the offering and coordinating of these activities and in particular to their assessment. The aim is to make these practical offerings more common place across the university. One of the ways this goal is being enacted is the establishment of internship units in different disciplines across the University. Two such examples are in the Faculty of Business and in the Faculty of Law. The approaches taken in these internship units are presented below.

### *Case Study AMB310 Internship*

AMB310 is available for Business students in their final year of study in the School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations. This unit is offered in three semesters (One, Two and Summer) each year. In this business unit students are placed in industry positions for a period of 120 hours over the course of one semester. Students undertake roles across a range of industries including advertising firms, public relations consultancies, airlines, construction, tourism operators, government, not for profit, and sporting organisations. This unit is not graded. Students receive a satisfactory/not satisfactory result. To satisfactorily complete the unit students need to complete all three assessment items (outlined below); contribute a minimum of five entries to an individual reflective blog on the Blackboard site (this is monitored and commented upon by the academic supervisors); complete online careers modules which are supplied by University Careers and Employment Office; and complete the 120 hours to the satisfaction of their industry supervisor.

The three specific assessment items which contribute to the satisfactory completion of this unit include an internship plan; the preparation of a job application responding to a posting on the course Blackboard site; and the preparation and presentation of a poster. The poster presentation was introduced in Semester One 2009 to replace a formal class presentation. The aim of the poster is to present a review and reflection of the internship. In the first piece of assessment in this unit (the internship plan), students outline the planned activities and responsibilities to be undertaken during the internship and specific personal objectives they wish to achieve during the internship. It is suggested they develop these objectives around the [Intuition 1] Graduate Capabilities. Students are encouraged to use the specified activities and objectives as a basis for their poster display and to incorporate these with the reflective postings they have made to their blog throughout their internship. This provides the audience with a 'snapshot' of their experience throughout the internship and their reflections on the skills, knowledge and abilities they have acquired.

The posters were shown in a Poster Session in the final week of semester. In this session, the posters were arranged around the walls of the room. Industry supervisors were invited to attend, along with academic guests, both from within the School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relation and the wider QUT community. Refreshments were provided and background music was used to create a relaxed atmosphere. Students were asked to be able to talk to their poster and be prepared to discuss their experiences and learning with the invited guests and other students. To help prepare the students for this Poster Session, information was provided on the Blackboard site including guidelines for preparing posters and the presentation session, links to websites which illustrated how to create effective posters and a YouTube clip which demonstrated how a poster session works. The students were also provided with an informal workshop on poster presentations where the plans for the evening were outlined.

#### *Case Study LWB420 Internship*

LWB420 is a final year unit in the undergraduate law course. The unit is offered in semester one and students complete placements of at least 60 hours in legal offices in the public or community sectors. The unit is graded and the assessment has traditionally comprised a class presentation, reflective journal, an application for a legal position, and the supervisor's assessment. Posters were introduced in 2009 to replace the class presentation. Students were required to produce a poster on a self-selected topic that related to their placement. The posters were presented at a Poster Showcase evening that was attended by supervising lawyers, other legal practitioners, academics from the law faculty and members of the wider QUT community. The Poster Showcase was held in week 11 of semester and followed a similar format to the AMB310 Poster Session. Students were also required to submit an abstract describing the thesis of the poster and a handout for the audience. The purpose of the poster assessment was to enable students to demonstrate their learning in the placement and to learn from the experiences of others. The posters were assessed using criterion referenced assessment which is generally considered to be more pedagogically sound than norm-referenced assessment because it is based on the principles of validity, reliability and transparency (Biggs 2003, p. 166). The criteria used for assessment of the posters were originality and relevance of the topic as expressed in the abstract 15%, choice of content (including critical analysis) 50%, overall appearance (colour, graphics, fonts, spacing and separation) 10%, organisation of content 15%, referencing 5%, and effectiveness of the handout 5%.

#### *Evaluation of effectiveness of posters as assessment*

The use of posters as assessment was evaluated by way of an anonymous paper survey of participants at each of the Poster Sessions. The survey comprised a mixture of closed and open ended questions. The purpose of the survey was to elicit views in relation to the use of posters as an assessment item, the motivation to attend the Poster Sessions and whether the posters demonstrated student learning during the internship. The survey used was similar in each unit however, in the Business unit only students were surveyed whereas in the Law unit all attendees at the Poster Session were invited to complete the survey.

Eighteen AMB310 students responded to the survey (out of a total of 29 students who participated in the poster session). In addition to evaluating the posters using a survey the poster session was videoed. This video included general footage of the evening and also more specific interviews with industry guests about the internship program in general and the suitability of posters as an assessment piece in internship units. The LWB420 survey was completed by 22 people in total; 16 students (out of a total of 20 students who participated in the poster session), 3 supervisors, 2 other lawyers and 1 member of the law faculty. The

responses to the open ended questions were collated according to the thematic responses. The responses to the questions in each unit have been considered in turn.

### *AMB310 Evaluation*

The feedback from the surveys was very positive in general about the use of posters as an assessment item. In response to the question, do you feel a poster was an appropriate and useful item of assessment for AMB310, 14 students agreed, two were unsure and one said no. The themes that emerged focused on the ability that it gave for students to interact with others, share other students' experiences and be reflective.

Some examples of comments focusing on the ability to interact include:

"The posters were a great way to visualise peoples' experience and network with industry"

"Good conversations with industry professionals".

"...I think it was a useful way of talking to people about the experience".

Examples of sharing their experiences with others and sharing in other students' experiences included:

"It's interesting to see how everyone else went with their internships. Also seeing everyone's creativity in their design"

"Gave us a chance to physically display examples of work completed over our placements"

Students also enjoyed the ability that the posters gave them to be reflective;

"Very reflective, fun and creative assessment item"

"It was a great and creative way to summarise and reflect on our experiences"

"It made me have to boil down my thoughts and experiences of the internship to the key points"

Students were asked to comment on what they enjoyed about the poster session. The overwhelming theme was the ability to interact with other people, both students and industry. Students enjoyed the ability to talk to other students about their experiences and to look at the activities they did on placement. They also liked the networking opportunities with industry and the relaxed atmosphere.

Examples of comments about the benefits of interacting with other students include:

"Chance to interact with other students in the subject (should be able to do more of this). Great to see what they were doing in their placements"

"Being able to discuss everyone else's experiences"

"That it was interactive and you were able to see what everyone else had achieved"

"Opportunity to find out about what other students did"

"Getting to know people I hadn't really had much to do with. Also seeing their posters showed some of their thinking processes"

"Speaking to other students about their experiences"

Comments about interacting with industry guests were also provided when asked about what they enjoyed about the poster session;

"Meeting industry people"

"Talking to other students and industry professionals"

"Mingling and networking"

"It was a good opportunity to network and also learn about other interns' experiences"

When the six industry supervisors were interviewed via video asked about the effectiveness of the poster session as a way of evaluating the internship program they agreed it was positive.

As one supervisor commented:

"It was a good demonstration of what they have learnt and how they can apply that. There are some fantastic examples of what they were hoping to achieve and whether they matched or didn't match that. I think it was a really good way of rounding out the end of the semester and to get them thinking about potential avenues for them to pursue when they finish".

Another supervisor commented on the passion that the students demonstrated when discussing their internship experiences:

“The poster session is great. The guys and girls from the internship subject have really had a great opportunity to show us all what they have been doing for the last three months. I know that they have all been really passionate talking about their experiences and what they have done in their roles”.

This passion was also picked up by another supervisor:

“It is good seeing the passion that they are displaying for the particular industry that they have been working in”.

The benefit of the posters as a reflective assessment piece was commented on by one industry supervisor:

“I think the reflective practice is really important. It is good for them to ... find a balance between your work and your own personal goals”.

The ability to use the poster session as a networking tool was also discussed:

“I think it is really beneficial to the students to connect with the people they have worked with and potentially other people that are involved in the internship program. It is a fantastic networking experience for them to meet people who have come here from different backgrounds and different companies”.

The following section outlines the case study of poster presentations in the Faculty of Law at QUT.

#### *LWB420 Evaluation*

As with AMB310 the feedback about the use of posters as an assessment item in the unit was generally very positive. The responses to the questions have been considered in turn.

What motivated you to attend the poster showcase?

The student responses to this question were generally that they were motivated by the assessment requirement. Three students also indicated that it was an opportunity to see what other students had been involved in during their placement. The two supervisors indicated they attended to support the unit and the students.

Did the students' posters demonstrate that learning took place during their placement?

Eighteen of the 21 responses to this question were positive, two responses were negative and one was unsure. The responses indicate that this was dependant on how much the student had enjoyed and learnt from their placement. For example;

“Mostly, it was clear what students had learned and the type of work they had been involved with. It was also clear whether they enjoyed it or not.”

When asked what they liked most about the poster showcase;

Eight of the students who responded to the survey indicated that the best thing about the poster showcase was the opportunity to meet other students and learn about their placement experiences. Four students indicated that the best thing was seeing the enthusiasm and passion of students who presented. One student indicated that meeting other supervisors was one of the best things.

Do you believe a poster was an appropriate item of assessment for LWB420?

This question was asked of students only. There were 12 positive and two negative responses to this question. Four students indicated that the poster allowed them to demonstrate knowledge; two that it enabled them to reflect on experiences; and two indicated that they enjoyed presenting at the showcase. One student suggested the poster assessment be weighted more heavily (than 25%); one suggested PowerPoint would be a better alternative; and one was very negative in regard to the cost of producing the poster and the need for graphic design skills.

Do you believe the criteria for assessment of the poster were appropriate?

This question was also asked of students only. Fourteen students responded positively and two did not respond to this question. Some examples of student's comments included:

“Yes, the focus was on the content that we showed – and how well it engaged the audience. “

“Yes – new ideas NOT regurgitate information already covered or with lots of literature out there already.”



## Conclusion

It appears from the above case studies that posters are both a suitable means of assessment for an internship unit and are also an example of authentic assessment. There is a continued challenge in work integrated learning about the approach taken to assess the learning experience. As universities are embarking on WIL programs they need to identify suitable authentic assessment methods that are transferable across disciplines. This paper has indicated that posters are an appropriate assessment method for WIL and that they can be introduced in different ways (graded and non-graded) and both are equally successful.

Assessment in higher education should be systematic (Brown & Knight, 1994). This systematic approach is captured in the poster presentations in both of these units. The poster presentations are a culmination of the learning experiences of the students and build on the other assessment items in the two units. In both units the reflective journey is recorded in either a journal (Law) or a blog (Business). This reflective journey is then feed in part to the poster design. Students are free to present whichever part of their internship journey they wish or any project relating to their internship. These task demonstrations, and the focus on student-structured attributes, are key components in authentic assessment.

The evaluation of the poster sessions by both industry and students clearly demonstrate the ability of this format of assessment to enable students to illustrate their learning experience and to reflect on their internship experience. The poster session also enables students to learn from other students' experiences and to network and interact with industry partners and fellow students. As the students are reflecting on real life experiences and are applying their knowledge and skills gained through their internship in their poster they are again indicating evidence of authentic assessment. Providing direct evidence of their learning through communicating to peers and to guests is the final demonstration of authentic assessment. While the benefits of the use of posters as assessment are clear, before implementing this type of assessment, an academic should consider the negative aspects from the student's point of view in terms of cost of production and the graphic design component of the task. Humanities are a new area for poster assessment methods and thus pose challenges for students to understand the unique elements of this type of presentation. Sciences and other related disciplines use posters to show specific factual information but this format does not exist in the same manner in the humanities. To ensure effective implementations of posters as assessment items students also need to be given suitable guidance for producing the posters, for example what font size to use, what topics are good to cover for the content, how much white space to use, what is effective layout presentation, and what to expect from a poster session in terms of oral participation. Past posters make useful guides for current students.

This paper has shown the suitability of poster sessions as an example of authentic assessment in work integrated learning. It has also demonstrated that this assessment is suitable across diverse disciplines such as Law and Business. Posters are typically evidenced in Science and Nursing disciplines but this paper has successfully shown that they can easily transfer to other disciplines such as the Humanities. Posters have the ability to demonstrate reflection in learning and are an excellent demonstration of experiential learning and assessing authentically. Notwithstanding the findings from this paper there are a number of limitations which cannot be overlooked. This paper investigates the use of poster presentations as assessment at only one university and in one semester. Although it was across two disciplines, to be able to generalise the results and provide a suitable guide for poster presentations, future research should investigate beyond this context. Future research should also look at the effectiveness of posters in comparison with other assessment techniques such as Reflective Diaries and the use of these assessment techniques should be monitored over time to ensure their continued relevance. .

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